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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANTANANARIVO 000435

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: RAVALOMANANA'S RUMORED RETURN WITH MERCENARIES:  
ANOTHER MALAGASY FAIRYTALE

REF: ANTANANARIVO 428

Classified By: POLOFF JEFF HULSE FOR REASONS 1.4 B AND D.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: With negotiations at a standstill, rumors of former President Ravalomanana's imminent return -- with or without mercenary support -- have been slowly but steadily reinforced by media reports, opposition statements, and alleged military preparations by the transition government. While we are aware of his recent discussions around securing private security support (i.e. bodyguards) in South Africa, France, and the U.S., we have no credible indications that this project is advancing; indeed, warned through intermediaries that we are following his discussions and object to them, he passed the message to the Ambassador over the weekend that he is not seeking to engage mercenaries. Last week's unhelpful COMESA statement lending rhetorical support to SADC's lingering but equally feckless "military option" fueled Ravalomanana's supporters here to claim that he will return by June 26 (Malagasy National Day), by force if necessary. Leaders in the transition government are appealing to patriotism for support against the alleged arrival of "foreign mercenaries", reinforcing airports to repel them. This has been just the latest useful propaganda opportunity for extremists in both camps, following the successful and equally specious playing of the mercenary card by the HAT in February and March. The only real effect thus far has been to weaken support for the AU/UN negotiations, while Ravalomanana himself remains unable to return without a prior political solution. When he fails to appear, the HAT will have successfully "repelled" an attack, while it will be obvious that the pro-Ravalomanana side has again overplayed its hand. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Ravalomanana has resided in South Africa since fleeing the country after the March 17 coup, and on June 3 was convicted in absentia to four years in jail and a USD 70 million fine for abuses of power. HAT President Andry Rajoelina has made clear his opposition to Ravalomanana's return under any circumstances, stating as recently as June 13 that there is "no possibility he will be allowed back" soon. Ravalomanana, however, has promised to return ever since departing: June 26 will be at least the fourth major "deadline" (following May 1, Easter, and Pentecost) that he will likely miss. Bolstering the rumors are recent reports misconstruing Ravalomanana's recent discussions with a U.S. security firm (over a personal security contract) as him seeking to hire foreign "mercenaries". There are also reports of similar discussions with South African and French entities.

¶3. (C) Whatever the truth of these rumors, the transition government has reinforced security (with an anti-aircraft battery) at the airport here, and reportedly is taking

similar measures in Fort Dauphin (south) and Morondava (west coast). They also are appealing to Malagasy nationalism against the possibility of foreign mercenaries. With the national day on June 26 approaching, the HAT has capitalized on an uptick in flag-waving patriotism - made easier by the fact that Ravalomanana has apparently called on his own supporters to avoid using the Malagasy flag in their own rallies. HAT Minister of Defense Noel Rakotonandrasana has put the armed forces on "high alert", although this is not readily apparent even at Ivato airport here; media also reported that eight armored vehicles left Tana to assist in the south, but the reports are unconfirmed and rely on anonymous sources. Sareraka, a trusted advisor to Rajoelina, has declared that the HAT should "take care of (the Legalist protesters) who continue to call for COMESA and foreign troops to bring (Ravalomanana) back". No action has been taken against the protesters, but the threat of Ravalomanana's return has given them an excuse to confront the remaining demonstrations more forcefully, after they had been largely out of reach for the last two months.

14. (C) The (pro-Ravalomanana) Legalists have been spreading the rumor as well, hoping that fear of a military confrontation will give them an edge in whatever process emerges from the current standoff at the negotiating table. While Legalist interlocutors recognize that foreign mercenaries would be anathema to most Malagasy, they are exploiting the threat in order to promote a deal with the HAT outside the context of the AU/UN negotiations. Alain Andriamiseza, leader of the non-TIM members of the Legalist movement, has attempted to sell Post on the idea of recognizing a HAT/Legalist deal as a means of avoiding the

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violent return of Ravalomanana, but Post has deferred to the AU and UN mediators, and attempted to push all parties back towards the negotiations.

15. (C) COMMENT: Even long-time observers living here continue to be astounded by the degree to which alternative or parallel realities are created and exploited here for partisan political gain. The allegation of imminent mercenary landings is not a new play here, having worked like a charm for TGV's side -- with equally little substance behind it -- just before the coup, inflaming nationalist sentiment for his side. The discredited Malagasy military sees this as red flag it cannot ignore -- and a useful opportunity to enhance its credibility by "stopping" an invasion that will never occur anyway. Last week the Ambassador advised Ravalomanana, through three separate channels, against pursuing any return by force; he responded with denials on Friday via the same three channels. In any case, we have no credible evidence that he is planning a return at this time, and none of this charade has any impact on daily life here. That said, partisan passions are rising with the approach of June 26, and both the HAT and the Legalists almost certainly will continue using the threat of his return to justify their actions. The international mediation process is likely to suffer most from their antics.

We will continue monitoring the situation carefully for any sign of credibility, however unlikely that is, but a much greater concern at this time is how to salvage the negotiations (septel). END COMMENT.

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